

The Influence of the Democratic Pattern on the Media System in Romania

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Abstract. Starting from the assumption that media is tightly related to the political system of the respective country, we will focus on the aspects that define democracy and determine the profile of the journalist's role in a democratic system. A good political system has the duty to accomplish two things: to create governments that ensure the well being of the citizens, through a civil society based on legislation and free changes in the market and to protect the citizens against corruption. We will provide a comparative analysis of the roles that journalists play in a democratic society. Our paper deals with the way in which the relation between the media and the political class is perceived in a democracy. This role is often defined by syntagms that focus on the journalists' rights and not on their responsibilities. Without a clear establishment of the obligations assumed by press professionals, these syntagms allow abuses. This paper will deal with the following aspects: the relation between the media and the political class, the transition of the Romanian media from totalitarianism to democracy, the free market of ideas, and the influence of journalists' professional culture.

Keywords: the role of the press, criticism, free market, professional culture, independence.

The democratic pattern entails the maximum possible reduction of the non-eligible institutions in the pyramidal structure of society, the free confrontation of the points of view regarding the issues of public interest and especially the power separation in the state¹, namely the legislative, judicial, and executive powers.

The freedom of the press and the freedom of speech are important within the democratic pattern and should obey to the legal regulations, as social life practices demonstrate that by limiting these rights, the social function of the "watchdog" assigned to the press is strongly hindered (Runcan 2002: 95). According to the global study "Press freedom index 2002"², run by the organization *Reporters without frontiers*, Romania was on the 52nd place out of 178 countries, together with the Maldives. Compared to previous years

¹ Article 1, paragraph 4 in the Romanian Constitution stipulates that "the state is organized according to the principle of the separation and balance of powers – legislative, executive, and judicial – within the constitutional democracy" (our transl.).

² *Press Freedom Index 2010*, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>. Retrieved 9.07.2011.

(42nd in 2007, 47th in 2008, and 50th in 2009), it is obvious that throughout four years Romania has been ranked on lower positions. In the global study “Freedom of the press” run by *Freedom House*, Romania is number 87 together with El Salvador, out of 196 states³. Part of the Central and Eastern Europe, Romania is situated before Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this context, it is expected that the democratic spirit of the Romanian media should be affected by such classifications. This is shown by the results of another study made by *Freedom House*⁴ in 2010, which indicates that

(...) the state of democracy has worsen in Romania due to the degradation of the indicators regarding the electoral process (the indicator grew from 2.50 to 2.75 due to fraud, partisanship and manipulations the Romanian press proved and due to the weak electoral management), the independent press (because of the political interferences and low professional standards in media the rating of the independent press went from 3.75 to 4.00) and the national government (the political tensions, the power abuse of the Government have determined the degradation of the rating from 3.75 to 4.00).

According to the study “Corruption regards all of us”⁵, which focused on the way in which corruption is perceived in public institutions, the media is on the first place (73.54%) as a credible source in providing information on corruption.

John Keane ([1991] 2000:31) considers that a good political system has a twofold duty: to create governments that ensure the well being of the citizens, through a civil society based on legislation and free changes in the market and to protect the citizens against corruption.

It is interesting to notice how the relation between the media and the political class is perceived in democracy. This role is often defined by syntagms, such as “the watchdog of democracy” or “the fourth power of a state”, syntagms that, according to Bogdan Diaconu (2009:122), relate to the journalists’ rights and not to their responsibilities. Unfortunately, without any clear establishment of the obligations assumed by press professionals, these syntagms allow abuse.

³ *Freedom of the press 2011*,

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fop11/FOTP2011Booklet.pdf> Retrieved 9.07.2011

⁴ *Freedom House Report “Nations in transition 2010”* <http://www.infomm.ro/raportul-freedom-house-bdquo-natiuni-in-tranzitie-2010-rdquo-starea-democratiei-s-a-inrautatat-in-romania>. Retrieved 9.07.2011.

⁵ *Press, the first credible source regarding information on corruption*, 2010, <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/presa-prima-sursa-credibila-privind-informatiile-despre-coruptie-7040425/>. This study was made by the National Agency of Public Servants, in partnership with the association Assistance and Programs for Sustainable Development in Romania. Retrieved 9.07.2011

In accordance to the above-mentioned, Alexander Miklejohn (in Pop 2001: 14) defined two major functions of the “watchdog” role that a journalist has within the general framework of democracy:

- the informative function. It entails the fluidization of communication between the power and the citizens, helping the voters to decide on their representatives, stimulating the elected to take into account the voters’ desires and to react to the interests of the citizens, stopping the aggressive actions of the power in relation to the individuals.
- the critical function. It allows the press to bring all the actions of the power under a thorough scrutiny, to evaluate the political programs and projects, to announce the participants in the game of public communication when the rules of the game are not respected by one of the parties involved.

Taking into account the fact that a journalist has the power and authority to select information received from different sources, Denis McQuail (2007) mentions another role of a journalist in society, namely that of a gatekeeper. The term is used in the studies on mass communication, related to any action involving the selection or rejection of a certain material offered for publishing. Lewin (in McQuail & Windahl [1982, 1993] 2004:133) notices that the information always has a layout in which there are guarded areas, where decisions are taken, either according to some impersonal rules, or by a gatekeeper, decisions which allow the information to be introduced within the circuit. This role of the media in society was perceived by Denis McQuail (2007:128) as being the tribune from which there are chosen who and what should have access to publicity channels or become visible in the public arena. The roles that the media chooses often include the role of expressing the public opinion or reflection of the reality of the society or that of ensuring a tribune where the world can express itself from.

In a state of law, media should not impose political decisions since the administrative decisions taken for fear of the press have no long-term efficiency (Diaconu 2009:122). The press has to stop at critically analyzing the governors’ activity and at revealing the irregularities within the public institutions, without breaking the professional norms. According to Catineanu (1982:206), the authentic or optimal criticism has to be:

- objective, because the critic operates with facts;
- principle-governed, as it considers the norms and normative requirements;
- constructive, as it offers a solution to avoid what may be found critical in the presentation of facts and in the nature of the respective doers’ deeds.

In the case of criticism, the subject cuts out, observes and retains from a fact, the personality of the author of the respective fact, especially the negative side. Criticism explores the negative side of the entire action so that it appears to be over all negative (Catineanu 1982:v207).

The means of mass communication were placed from the beginning under the guardianship of the authority, either political or religious and until the emergence of the papers for the wide public, the information was meant for an aristocratic or financial elite, namely for the great bankers and military or economic noblemen who held control over the main sources of communication. This system was interested in excluding the population from the decisional processes and in cultivating some “silent and unidirectional system to communicate with the citizens” (Pop 2001:11).

The switch from this unidirectional system to a bidirectional and even a multidirectional one entails that each individual uses his right to decide on the destiny of the community through the representative of their own interests. Within this context, Miruna Runcan (2002:55) considers that this delegated power is not used for personal purposes since it is temporarily held and distributed according to the competence assumed by the public person, interwoven with the trust provided by the person delegating it.

The democratic pattern, which can be accepted as a feature of our civilization as fruit of the Christian-Judaic evolution, is characterized by a distribution of power within society at regular intervals, by delegating it by each individual to those persons considered to be able to efficiently represent them.

The portrait of the first decade of democracy in Romania was described by Victor Visinescu (2000:182-183) as being “overwhelmed by projects of reform, not many accomplished, by distorted economic phenomena and a conflictive political life” (our transl.). There was not a single decade which might have provided the post-communist media the opportunity to solidify its stage of evolution, to impose its behavioral patterns, to establish the agenda of the public opinion, to verify the effects according to a new law of the press, to shape some ethics codes (which were mainly initiated but unfortunately practically inapplicable) (Visinescu 2000:182-183). After December 1989, the main democratic conquest focused on the abolishing of the political control over the media and the initiation of the process of demystifying reality. The mechanisms allowing the functioning of the media on the free market of ideas were institutionalized according to the laws of offer and demand on this market (Roșca 2006:150).

The emergence of modern democracy was marked within its development by two fundamental concepts: freedom and equality. The liberation of the media from the

pressure of the public authority took place only after the equalization of the free access to public interest information (Pop 2001:12). In the same context, the democratization of the media culture took place together with the emergence of the modern means of communication, allowing infinite possibilities of expression but also the use of a sufficient number of sources so that the doubts regarding the truthfulness of information diminishes as much as possible (Popa 2002:20). As everywhere in the world, the Romanian press is in a relative independence from its sources, a dependency associated with the conditions of the changes and reforms of the entire social, economic, legislative regime, because nowadays there is an information overflow that has to be selected and distributed to the public.

The Romanian transition from totalitarianism to democracy⁶ can be tackled upon by taking into account the positions that the Romanian media had regarding the freedom of press within the past years. According to Denis McQuail (in Petcu 2000: 49), the press can be considered free in case the following elements regarding the independence control are interwoven: the government/ political power; the sources of information; the media owners; the internal constraints; the advertising providers; the pressure groups. According to the study run by the Company of Sociological Research and Branding Pro Democratia, three out of five Romanians consider that the Romanian media is independent. According to the same study, for the question regarding the importance of media for democracy, 58% of the respondents claimed that it is very important.⁷

Therefore, the press can be independent only if there is a free and competitive economic environment and a maximum diversity of the means of expression to ensure a diversification of the results. All this offers the context of a free media market that can provide a multiplication of the sources, means and ideas expressed which may lead to a real liberation of the means of information from the pressure of the political environment and to their settlement under the public control of the citizens. The free market of ideas is that domain of the cultural production where the individual absolutely exerts the functions of a private person without being vexed by the violence and aggressiveness of the state. The free market has three major functions in public processes: (1) mobilizing

⁶ Article I, paragraph 3 in the Romanian Constitution stipulates that “Romania is a state of law, democratic and social, in which the dignity of the humans, rights and liberties of the citizens, free development of human personality and political pluralism represents supreme values, in the spirit of the democratic traditions of the Romanian people and the ideals of the December 1989 Revolution ad are guaranteed”.

⁷ *Three out of five Romanians consider that the press is independent*, 2010, <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/trei-din-cinci-romani-considera-ca-presa-este-independenta-7438572/> Retrieved 9.07.2011.

the existent ideas, (2) stimulating the emergence of new ideas, (3) facilitating the critical circulation of information. Doru Pop (2001:13) considers that anyone who desires to take part in the dialogue of ideas can do that, either through the access to an existent means of expression or through the shaping of their own means of communication. Therefore, in a theory debated by Peter Gross regarding the fundamental roles of the media in a society, it is highlighted the social responsibility that media plays in sustaining a media system within the influence area of the state and government control. To this end, the media is responsible for the dissemination of important and credible information, as well as for the different angles of approach, thus “fueling the market of ideas” that sustains a democratic society (Gross [2002] 2004:48).

The Romanian state has shown to be relatively conservative in what the free market of the media is concerned, by allowing and maintaining the monopoly over the raw material resources and materials, over the national network and broadcasting but also by introducing the taxing policy which is not at all stimulating (Petcu 2000:51). We can therefore consider that this manifestation of the freedom of the individual in society reveals the supervision function of the media, namely that of a watchdog. Pop (2001:14) is of the opinion that journalists are endowed with two major functions: supervising the politicians’ activities and providing correct information to citizens. Journalists cannot exert these democratic functions unless within the free game of the market because this provides the frame for a mobility of ideas, being permissive and innovative.

In what the independence from the government is concerned, democracy should provide an adequate legislative frame which besides the separation of powers in the state also includes the assurance of the free access to the public interest information, forbiddance of censorship and discrimination, freedom of expression, compliance with the human rights. If by constitutional guarantee, all these conditions are fulfilled, we can consider the condition of a correspondingly legal frame being set up for an autonomous press in a democratic state that will avoid the risk of governmental control. Marian Petcu (2000: 56) considers that at the present moment most of the press is autonomous, but the place of the external control agent, namely the Power, has been taken over by an internal control agent, namely the owner, thus the press being free but not independent.

Although the judicial frame guarantees the free initiative, the evolution of the Romanian press, from the perspective of the holders of the economic power often reveals the submission of the press enterprises to some random economic and political interests. In this game, a new relation is set up, namely one between the editor and the owner, whose freedom of movement is limited by some specific interests which will influence the editorial program (Petcu 2000: 56). In clarifying the aspects regarding what the

journalist's independence from the internal constraints means, Marian Petcu brings the issue of internal pluralism into discussion which refers to the journalists' freedom to express their opinions that are not always the ones of the media owner but which respects the professional statute.

The media from the democratic-corporatist states was marked in the past by a strong association with the political forces. Hallini and Mancini (2004:170) have initially considered that such an association would make the personalization of the journalist difficult. The democratic-corporatist states are characterized by a rapid and strong development of the journalistic professionalism. In the case of the Scandinavian states, the wide circulation of newspapers has allowed the news organizations to accumulate substantial economic resources and therefore offer the journalists decent salaries which made the need for additional incomes unnecessary. The first journalist unions were established by the Scandinavians and other states in the north of Europe and these organizations are very strong even today comparative with their counterparties in the plural-liberal polarized states. The establishment of the first professional organization in Norway in 1883 preceded the Journalists' Institute in Great Britain by seven years. In The Netherlands, the first journalist union (NJK) was established in 1894; other unions followed later, being based on the religious and political membership.

Marian Petcu (2000:56) considers that the authentic journalist can hardly be met in Romania since the Romanian journalistic society is characterized by a lack of professional culture, a weak cohesion among the journalists and by the media owners' tendency to level the journalists' opinions, pretending they are unanimous. The development of the free information media does not necessarily mean that media is associated with democratization and a democratic society or that it brings professional culture and good journalism (Gross [2002] 2004:15). According to the theory of media effects, developed by McQuail ([1982, 1993] 2004), the media does not act directly only over the individuals but has effects over the culture, the values and the norms of a society. Media reveals a set of images, ideas, evaluations that the audition members turn to when building their own line of behavior (McQuail & Windhal [1982, 1993] 2004: 83). Depending on the culture they belong to, people have their own positive-laden values, such as freedom, will, honor, respect, loyalty. Miruna Runcan (2002) shares the same opinion, namely any organization proposed by a culture is based on and extracts its energy from a homogenous type of mentality that establishes moral and commonly accepted values. The fertile layer represented by a mass civil awareness and a civil culture spread within the depth of the social body may be improved according to some variables: education, public debate frames, individual and group behavior of the new

political class and last but not least a proper functioning of the communication means. (Runca 2002:60).

The journalists' professional culture is defined by Mihai Coman (2007: 319) as being an assembly of representations developed by profession, regarding the specific activity, representations through which they legitimate on social level, attributing themselves a mission, as well as an assembly of norms (regarding the professional procedures and ethical standards) through which it institutes and controls the specific system of competencies and criteria. All these are expressed in different texts (laws, regulations, good practice handbooks, ethical codes, professional guides, scientific studies regarding the professional development) or in fictional ones (novels, movies, series etc.). In tight connection with this lies the organizational culture, defined as the correct ensemble of common attitudes for all employees in a work context or a specific configuration of norms, values, beliefs and ways of behaving that characterize the way in which the groups or individuals collaborate in an organization (Jary, Jary 1991, in Coman 2007:319).

The changes in the patterns of journalist practices accepted in a certain society take into account the changes in culture, distribution of power, market conditions, media ideology and groups of journalists in the respective society. Regarding the Romanian journalists' professional culture, Marian Petcu (2000:60) considers that the project of the Law of Press Freedom proposed by the Society of Journalists in Romania in 1990, betrayed the deficiencies of journalists' professional culture by including the deontological norms within the law body although the intention was for these norms to be exclusively established by journalists.

The journalists in Eastern Europe did not develop a professional culture strong enough to balance the political forces that dominate their societies. Peter Gross ([2002] 2004:145) considers that at the end of 1990, the beginnings of the professionalization of journalists led to a stronger commitment towards impartiality, a distance from the political parties and the influences of the state and the government. The conditions of the market changed considerably, most of the countries having good faith estimated markets. The media ideology has also evolved from instances of powerful dependency towards instances of relative independence from political parties. Neither most of the journalists nor the media elites in the region manifested an interest for the change of the principles or practices in their profession (Gross [2002] 2004:145).

The media in Romania is profoundly affected by the lack of what we would call an ideology of information property. In states with democratic traditions, there has been consolidated a threefold assumption: (1) it is not administration which is the owner of

information; (2) the citizen should have access to as much information as possible, information coming from the state institutions; (3) it is the taxpayer who is the owner of the information temporarily under the government administration.

Mihail Dragnea (1999: 24) considers that besides the political vision role that press plays in a society, there is another role assigned to the press, namely that of an intermediary between power and citizens. This role involves a means of spreading the public interest information, a stage from where issues are brought to light, a supervisor of the civil rights compliance.

Any enterprise or organization, once entered in the public space, begins the confrontation with the media universe, because any public speech has to be publicized in order to obtain more dissemination. By means of journalists, we can say that the media is righteously considered to be the guard that keeps away the domination of different powers that animate the society (Dagenais [1999] 2002:20).

To conclude, we will take into account the fact that media, as a holder of the democratic principles, has the great role of educating the society. As Doru Pop (2001) highlighted the negative component of the media always involves the policies imposed by the media owners and the business world. Meanwhile media has taken over some attributions of the political parties: stimulating the public, cultivating an ideological identity, mobilizing the voters and especially creating a communication area between the citizens and the power.

The public is more or less aware of the fact that the Romanian mass-media has been experiencing a political control. The great dilemma of the media lies on its possibility of a correct choice between a state of acceptance or denial regarding the risks that it may run in case of a diminishing of its ideological actions. Although the editorial autonomy has evolved, there is no clear understanding of the roles, functions and professionalism that Romanian journalists and journalism should play in a democratic society.

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